

**Creative
Practice
Conference**

27-29 August 2014

Exhibitions

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Papers

In the fulfilling of the nine actions, we experienced an overwhelming interest from local communities, news media and Municipality, caused by the transformation process itself. Interaction with local people revealed possible ways of disclosing hidden material and immaterial values and contributed hereby to the future establishment of a new practice'. This practice is considered as a critical alternative to today's demolition programmes and growth-orientated efforts in the field⁸.

On the basis of reactions and discussions with the local people, students, politicians and municipality and feedback from the local press we try to broaden the understanding of the local feeling and atmospheres in the community.

The first preliminary findings begin to appear, though the research is still in its initiation phase and further interaction and evaluation are needed.

We learned, that local peoples positive attitudes towards the demolition programmes were in conflict with their willingness to maintain the identity of their community. Attitudes are often easier to change than behavior (Heberlein 2012). Some of the local identity is embedded in the abandoned buildings as latent potentials and can, according to our findings, possibly be revealed in interaction with the local people. The local people are carriers of narratives of a place, and they are the connection between the embedded fragments of local identity, which remain in the abandoned building. Without knowing it, local people often act as keys to disclose the embedded values.

- 1 The project relates to international efforts in the field - 2006, Shrinking cities: The complete works 1, Aachen. Ellen Braae: 2003, Konvertering af ruine industrielskaber, Aarhus
- 2 I Capello, Caragliu, Nijkamp: 2012, Territorial Capital and Regional Growth: Increasing Returns in Cognitive Knowledge Use, Tinbergen Institute Discussion Paper, TI 2008-010, <http://www.tinbergen.nl/discussionpapers/09059.pdf> (assessed on 01.05.2012).
- 3 Ilpo Koskinen, John Zimmerman, Thomas Binder, Johan Redström: 2011, "Design Research Through Practice", Waltham.
- 4 Donald A. Schön: 1983, Den reflekterende praktiker.
- 5 Gloria Moure: 2006, Gordon Matta-Clark - Works and Collect
- 6 The letter "D" refers to the generation of the action. In this case
- 7 Tim Jackson: 2009, Prosperity without Growth, New York.
- 8 2013, Rural-Urban Partnerships, OECD.

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Relational Urban Practice

Mediating between the built and the lived

Petra Pferdmenges

Keywords: Relational; urban practice; engage; observe; act

Trained as an architect and having practiced for five years in renowned architectural offices throughout Europe I soon became frustrated about the lack of a social agenda within the discipline early in my career. On one side I struggled with the fact to serve a specific clientele with the necessary economic background to afford an architect. On the other side I felt trapped within the conventions of the discipline to produce built space rather than lived space.

Searching for meaning in the profession I observed how new immigrants produced vibrant urban space by engaging with the public domain after their arrival in Ceuta, Spain (Image 1) and mapped how those relational processes transformed the physical environment. (I apply the term relational rather than social, because a social being can relate to a physical space or object without necessarily relating to another social being.) I became obsessed with mapping how others produce such a hybrid typology of space between the built and the lived that I refer to as relational urban space.

How could my fascination of relational urban space produced by citizens inform a practice that generates such space? Who are the collaborators of a relational urban practice?

1. Re-producing relational urban space

In 2010 Jean-François Pirson invited me, together with the photographer Stijn Beeckman, to set up an exhibition in the vitrine of his gallery in Ixelles, Brussels. I was inspired by the window as a spatial typology in direct relation to the public domain. How could we inject a relational object and process to transform the space into a relational urban space without spending ourselves the duration of the exhibition behind the vitrine?

Crossing Brussels red light district to teach at Sint Lucas Architectuur the windows inhabited by sex-workers attracted my attention. I observed and mapped how women transformed the space continuously, producing change of space over time. Besides the multiple everyday objects as furniture or cigarette boxes we identified the neon light and the curtain as relational objects. The neon light signalizes the presence of sex-workers in the bar, the positioning of the curtain allows the woman to express if they are available for the client.

We intended to reproduce the relational urban space in the vitrine of the gallery, copy-pasting the relational objects as the curtain, the light, the furniture and cigarette boxes and asked Jean-François to change their position daily, faking the related process of women engaging with those objects to generate change of space over time.

Provocative by nature some passers-by walked by, stopped, and returned, surprised about the project. Others engaged the police as they were afraid that their neighborhood would become a red light district. Others engaged with their neighbors to express their surprise. Because of some men trying to engage with a sex-worker, ringing the doorbell in the middle of the night, the exhibition had to be shut down one week before the official closure.

Even though people could not engage physically with the installation nor with the supposed sex-worker behind the vitrine, the project provoked a relation of passers-by to the window and generated relations among several residents. Besides engaging with a few people and interview them on their experience, we did not engage into the relational processes that the project produced.

In the next chapter I will reveal how my practice evolved from a copy-paste of others to a self engaged production of relational urban space.

2. Producing relational urban space

The project is based upon an observation of the relational urban space of Brussels Fairground in which I recorded and edited a movie of citizens engaging with the space, mapping how the relational objects (stands opening up and closing down) and relational processes (people engaging with the stands and among each other) transformed the space over the duration of 16 hours.

Similar to the curtain and light in the vitrine in the previous chapter I set up a relational urban space: a candy-floss stand for the duration of an afternoon, recalling the event space of the fairground. The key-shift is that through my presence I secured the relational process, producing and selling candy-floss. My presence, combined with the stand allowed me to engage with others – and to engage others into the relational process. Passers-by changed their circuit to purchase a candy-floss which they then carried with them.

Different to the project of the Vitrine, the candy-floss stand allowed people to engage physically with the project, transforming the public domain not only through a change of circuit, but through carrying a candy floss with them, producing relational urban space.

Further, my presence in this intervention is a crucial shift in my practice. On the one hand it allowed me to engage with people, on the other hand to engage people into the process. Anyhow this shift generated frustration: when I left, the project was finished.

In the next chapter I am struggling with a similar issue, but reveal how a relational object, the flower, combined with my presence allows me to enable others to co-produce relational urban space.

Figure 1
Africa enters
Europe: Mapping
of new immigrant
engaging with
public space,
Couta, 2005, Alive
Architecture

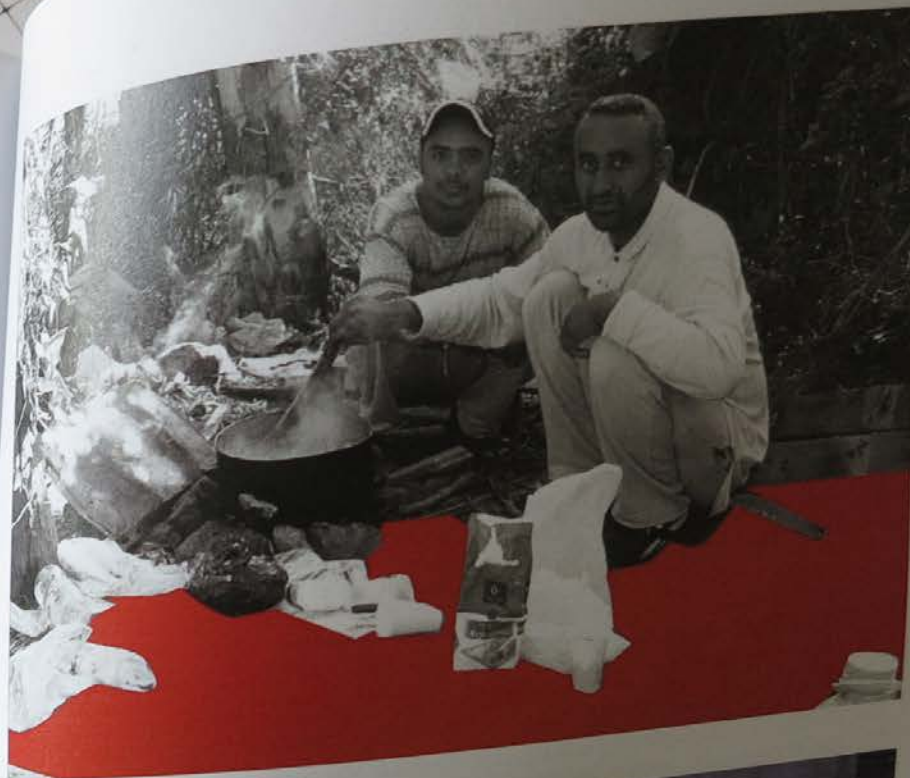


Figure 2
Visible Invisible:
Reproducing
relational urban
space, Brussels,
2010, Alive
Architecture



3. Co-producing relational urban space

I developed the project Sweet Flowers in Brussels red light district within the framework of the study 'Junction' launched by Brussels Bouwmeester and the art center Recyclart. Different to the previous projects that were based upon the observation of relational urban space this project interprets the need of sex workers for better clients that I observed through a previous urban action. As I could not fulfill such a demand myself it was necessary to engage the potential clients to engage with the sex worker.

For the duration of two hours I offered flowers to passers-by that they could then offer to the sex-workers. After a while men were walking with a flower in their hand along the street, similar to the previous project in which people walked with a candy floss in the public domain. The difference to the previous project is that through offering the flower I enabled men to engage with women.

The flower, as the relational object, generated on the one hand a process that transformed, temporarily, the relational urban space. Men were walking with flowers along the street; some decorated the public domain with it. On the other hand the flower generated social relations among potential clients and the sex-workers.

The picture above is extracted from a video that allowed me to record the relational process that the passers-by and I co-produced with a hidden camera. The double perspective, observing from the inside and observing with an external eye, helped me to see how the relational process allows passers-by to engage with me, and with women, similar to the movie of the existing relational space in the fairground.

Compared to the previous project I produced relations among others which was a fulfilling outcome for me. On the other hand the temporariness of the event remained a struggle for me that I wished to overcome.

In the next project I will reveal how I enable citizens to produce relational urban space that allows for a durational project independent from my own presence.

4. Citizens producing relational urban space

As co-curator of the festival Parckdesign 2014: Parckfarm, together with the landscape architecture office Taktyk, our team was selected because of the two expertise's: Taktyk for the built space, Alive Architecture for the lived space. The site for the festival is Molenbeek, a neighborhood inhabited by 60% by a Muslim community and one of the highest unemployment rates in Brussels. It was crucial that the public money for the festival generates social and economic impact upon the urban context. On one side we achieved this through selecting local teams from the neighborhood, on the other side by keeping a budget aside that would allow local citizens to contribute to the project through local initiatives. Based upon the notion of lived space and the timeframe of the festival (five months) the

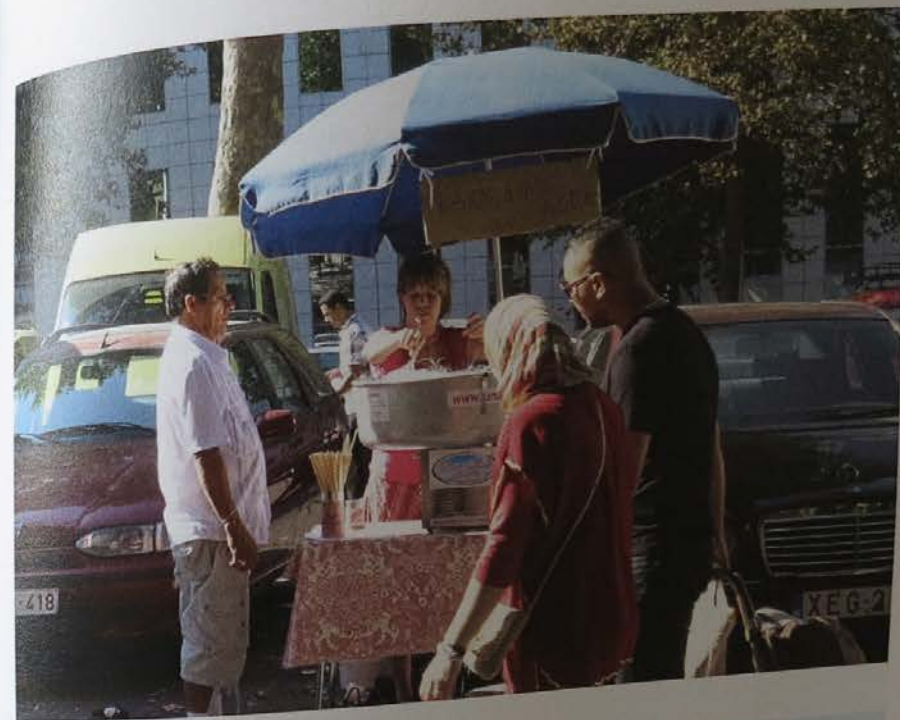


Figure 3
Barbe à Papa:
Producing
relational urban
space, Brussels,
2011, Alive
Architecture



Figure 4
Sweet Flowers:
Engaging the
passer-by to engage
the local, Brussels,
2012, Alive
Architecture

project is durational by nature. It was crucial to curate others not only to produce relational objects, but relational processes.

I designed the Farmtruck, a tool that would allow me to engage local citizens into the relational process. Far too slow in construction, I set up monthly meetings at Mohammed's café next to the site to generate social processes that could produce relational urban space. The meetings allowed me to engage with others, that allowed the artists to engage with local citizens, and that allowed local citizens to engage with each other.

I will zoom in to a single local initiative, the bread oven, a case study that represents the latest shift in my practice. The project was born out of a dialog between two local citizens within one of the monthly meetings at Mohammed's café. Stefanie raised her interest to bake bread, Abdel referred to his expertise to build a bread oven. I encouraged the project and facilitated it to be realized through financing a local initiative.

The bread oven is a relational object initiated and produced not by me, but by Abdel. Abdel is cutting the wood and heating the bread oven every Saturday and Sunday. Besides the visitors that we engage into the project Abdel engages local citizens to bake their bread, producing a relational urban space, between the built and the lived.

The bread oven allows Abdel to make and sell pizza whenever a special event is taking place in the Parckfarm. Anyhow, because of the informal character of this economy the sustainability of the project beyond the festival remains fragile. Because generating an economy beyond the durational and to produce a permanent, sustainable project is the fragility of this project. In the relational object of the Farmhouse I am exploring this option through creating a non-profit organization. I consider this issue of beyond durational as a crucial aspect that I wish to develop further in my practice.

Rather than designing the relational object in this project I designed the relational process, first by designing the Farmtruck, later by setting up the monthly meetings. It allowed me engaging local citizens, observing their desires and expertise's to facilitate selected propositions to contribute to the project. Similar to the flower in the previous chapter that allowed me to enable relational processes, the local meetings allowed me to empower others to produce and animate relational objects – always with the objective to generate relational urban space.

5. Relational urban practice

The projects revealed in chapter one to four reveal how my practice shifted from observing citizens producing relational urban space to catalyzing relational urban space produced by citizens.

The fact that not only the relational object in itself but the presence of a person that produces and engages others into the relational process makes it impossible

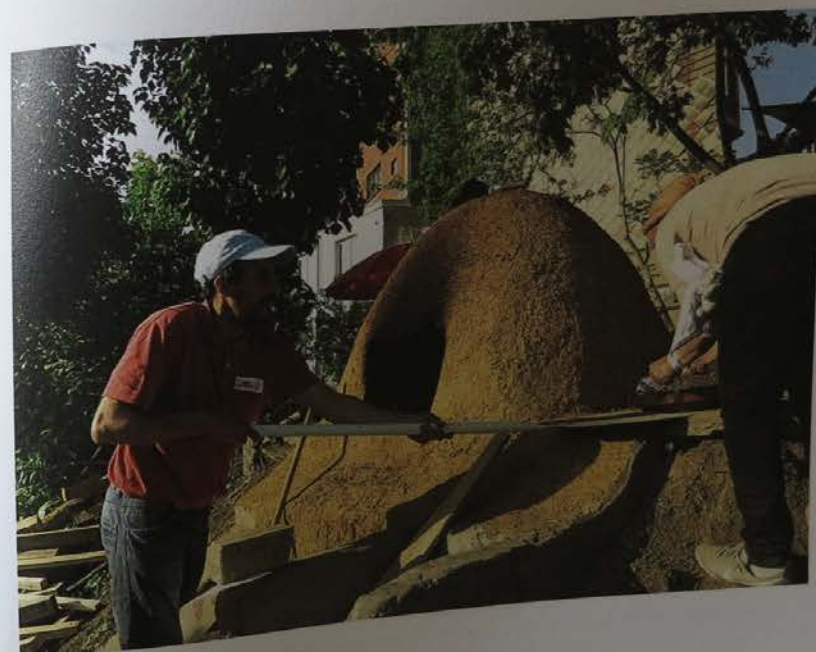


Figure 5
Parckdesign
2014: Bread oven,
initiated, built and
animated by Abdel,
Brussels, 2013,
Local initiative
launched by Alice
Architecture

to generate a sustainable project of relational urban space myself. Further, the vibrant spaces produced by citizens that I was fascinated by in Ceuta, were not designed, nor animated by an architect, but were initiated by a personal need or expertise external from the designer.

Facilitating the production of a relational object initiated, built and animated by a local citizen that is available to invest the necessary time (rather than an artist or designer where each intervention serves to disseminate their work to become recognized) may generate a relational urban space for a limited duration. In order to generate a sustainable relational object beyond the period of a festival it is crucial that the relational urban space allows the responsible person to generate a minimal economy to keep him / her engaged into the necessary relational process.

While I did design the Farmtruck as a relational object, in the Farmparck I designed the relational process of social engagement that would then contribute to the production of the relational urban space.

The durational or permanent production of relational urban space within projects developed in a commissioned framework for art or urban development is therefore only possible through the designer engaging the citizen to produce the relational urban space. Not the architect as double agent (Mel Dodd) but the collaboration between the architect and the local citizen(s) are those who make up for a relational urban practice: Alive Architecture.

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Conceptual Competitions as Mediator of New Architectural Paradigm

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This paper explores the potential of experimental practice in evaluating the design process within architectural practice. It starts with an assumption that current practice can improve the quality of meaningful engagement to some topic by translating its prudence into a format that develops new models of practice. Architectural competitions as means of that improvement become incubators for creative practice and therefore a mediator of new architectural practice. Competition platforms, while translating this theory, appear as a format that is understandable to a broader architectural audience. The empirical case study of Think Space is a starting point of the research in which a whole range of delicate articulation between theoretical research and an enthusiasm for design can be found. Conceptual competitions serve as indispensable mediator between designers and the context of their work. The architects can act only within a contextual framework. They operate as architectural ateliers where they are free to invent an imaginary project. Apart from the current taxonomy of competition briefs, with a conceptual one architects to answer to a set of questions. This kind of competition sets up a platform for exchange of ideas and reviews with important spatial and social consequences. This research is not an objective review of one architectural competition, but rather a subjective selection of individual works and examples of possible change towards a new architectural paradigm. Examples of entries from the first cycle of the competition are not randomly selected. The analysis of competition results tries to articulate a process of designing as a means to increase knowledge and parallel research in similar fields. The challenging hypothesis becomes a starting point for development of innovative models. Models can take hold as a new methodological paradigm for the redefinition and creation of a new reality. An international conceptual competition, like Think Space, is a space that provokes, attracting moderates and creative content from the global world. It could produce a new architectural paradigm. Think Space is cleverly designed platform for the promotion of creativity which brings architects back to the idea of thought.

An architectural competition can be regarded as a 'platform' where diverse findings from various fields of research and discourses relating to topics can be compared. In that manner competitions work effectively as experimental laboratory that gathers different forms of experience, knowledge and backgrounds. Unlike particular architectural proposals this laboratory's platform becomes important in shaping the development of future